

Artists are the heart and soul of a community

POL POSITION

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California's funding for the arts — along with many other important items — was decimated in the last budget. This was easily the most difficult budget vote I have ever cast, and I know most of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle would agree with me on that.

But it is the arts I want to focus on now. The arts do not come free. Children, of course, are natural artists — they paint, sing, dance, act and create with little or no prompting from any of us. But as artists develop and prepare to give their gifts to the larger world, they require sustenance — and they always have. From the Greek support of the first theaters and dramatic festivals in ancient Athens, through the Medici family's patronage of the finest painters, sculptors and musicians of the Italian Renaissance, artists have needed government and private funding to continue their work. The image of the starving artist is a quaint and romantic one, but it is hardly what we would wish on anyone.

Professional arts organizations, such as local symphony orchestras, require even more of us than individual artists do. But, like any investment, the return we get from these dedicated and civic-minded organizations is well worth the capital we put in. What every culture leaves to posterity is its art. And I, for one, am more than willing to invest in the culture that I will leave to my grandchildren, and to the ages to come.

But the relationship between modern government and the arts has long been a testy one. Some in government are suspicious of art and artists. And, some artists are nervous about what government will require of them if they accept public money. They are apprehensive that the money will come with strings attached, and that this will compromise their artistic freedom.

To some extent, both of these are true. Great art does sometimes have the power to challenge authority, and, to some extent, grant money always comes with qualifications. But I want to get past those shorthand notions about public arts funding, because I believe it is vital for us to understand one another better.

We are truly at a turning point in the relationship between government and the arts. I had one of the hardest fights of my life this year to prevent the Legislature from eliminating the California Arts Council entirely. Not just defunding it, but eliminating it from the state. I have no idea how or why this proposal came about, but it was made and it very nearly happened — California almost became the first state in the nation to abolish all public funding of the arts.

As it is, we will continue to fund the arts, but at a level that is the lowest in the nation. Lower than Mississippi. Lower than Alabama. Lower than North Dakota. The state's General Fund, which last year gave the California Arts Council about \$18 million, will now fund it at \$1 million. We will thus be spending less than 3 cents per capita on the arts. For comparison, the national average is \$1.00 per capita. The math on that is fairly easy — California spends about 3% of the national average on the arts.

This is shocking. In part, it is due to the unprecedented budget deficit we faced this year. We eliminated entire state agencies in this budget, we made enormous cuts to health care and education, we slashed and slashed even deeper, and we barely made it out alive.

But we could have found some of that \$17 million we cut in the arts somewhere else. We didn't. There was no political will to do that. In addition to myself, there were only a handful of legislators in either party, in either house, who were keenly interested in what would happen to the arts. Please pay special attention to that — this year, there was virtually no constituency for the arts in the Legislature. I don't know how that happened. But it is something each and every one of us has to help reverse.

This is a crisis, but that means it is also an opportunity. My job, over the next year, is to get across a simple message to artists — just because we do not have the money to fund the arts, that does not mean we cannot foster the arts. Every artist in this state is valued — if not in monetary terms, then certainly in spiritual terms. Artists are the soul of a society, and even in this budget catastrophe we have not abandoned our soul.

And arts organizations such as local museums, symphonies and theaters are the churches that help nurture those souls. Sometimes they are cathedrals, and sometimes they are soup kitchens, but whether they are as grand as Disney Hall, or as humble as the 50-seat theater on a back alley, we cannot get by without them.

It is going to be a very hard year for the arts, and I suspect there will be more hard years to come. But we have to keep getting the message out — the arts are not decoration, and they are not a frill. They are the beating heart of our body politic.

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